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From Pph. vol. 424
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MR. COLDEN'S LETTER.

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At a meeting of citizens, held at No. 66, Nassau Street, on the evening of the 20th instant, Mr. ERASTUS ELLSWORTH was called to the Chair, and C. C. BLATCHLY, chosen Secretary.

On motion of HENRY DANA WARD, Esq. resolved, unanimously, that a committee of three be appointed to address one or more of the most eminent men of this state who are Free Masons, soliciting their opinion upon the general character and tendency of Masonic Societies, accompanied with such explanations and remarks as they may choose to make upon the subject.

Resolved, unanimously, That the Chairman appoint that committee.

Whereupon, Mr. ELLSWORTH appointed Col. RICHARD VARICK, THOMAS FESSENDEN, Esq. and SAMUEL ST. JOHN, Esq. to constitute that committee.

NEW-YORK, April 21st, 1829.

HON. CADWALLADER D. COLDEN,

Sir—The undersigned, the committee appointed in pursuance of the above resolution, recollecting you as a distinguished member of a sagacious and discriminating profession; having reason to remember you with respect and gratitude as Mayor of this city, and as their Legislative Representative at Albany and at Washington; and reposing confidence in you as a MAN; and, being informed, moreover, that you are intimately acquainted with Free Masonry, and have attained to its most elevated degrees, beg leave, in discharge of the trust committed to them, to solicit the communication of your opinion and judgment upon the tendency and effects of that institution, accompanied with such explanations and remarks as you may choose to make upon so interesting a subject. Entertaining opinions unfavorable to Masonic associations, on general principles, with much sincerity, and without a particle of hostility to Masons as individual men, the committee, as well as those they represent, are not only willing but desirous to obtain light and truth upon a question which, at present, so deeply agitates the community, from any quarter, Masonic or otherwise, whence it can be communicated, and from which it may be confidently anticipated, it will come unperverted, as far as it is communicated at all.

With great respect, we are,

Your fellow-citizens, and ob't serv'ts.

RICH'D VARICK,
THOMAS FESSENDEN,
SAM'L ST. JOHN.

MR. COLDEN'S ANSWER.

GENTLEMEN,—I do not think I ought to object to communicate in this manner, the sentiments I have long held, and have frequently expressed, in relation to Free Masonry.

It is true that I have been a Mason a great number of years, and that I have held very high Masonic offices and honors. It is equally true that I have for a long time ceased to have any connexion with the institution, because, I have believed, and do now believe, it is

productive of much more evil than good. It is also true that I have on no fit occasion hesitated to express this sentiment.

I would not do any thing inconsistent with any obligation I may have, however inconsiderately, assumed. But I know nothing of Masonry to render it so horrible as it would be in my estimation, if it obliged me to be silent when I thought its influences were pernicious. It would be detestable if it did not leave me at liberty to warn others from following my example in becoming a member of an institution, of which from its very nature, I must have been ignorant until I was initiated, and of which, a just estimate can only be formed from experience.

I shall disclose none of the secrets of Masonry, (if it now has any secrets,) nor shall I say any thing inconsistent with what is due to the eminent living, and illustrious dead, whose names are recorded as members of the fraternity. I have had a just pride in being associated with many of these, and now feel that I make a sacrifice in pursuing a course which may separate me from men, for whose pure motives and righteous principles, I shall never cease to entertain the most profound respect.

Discussions and expositions of the principles of Masonry, of its origin, its religion, its morals, and its science, have not been considered as betraying any obligation; but on the contrary, have been sanctioned by the highest Masonic authority. It is true that, till of late, Masonry has always been a theme of panegyric; but if the advocates of the institution are free to speak of its merits, it cannot be a violation of duty in those who hold different opinions, to express them with becoming respect and deference.

I desire that it should be understood, that the sentiments I now entertain on this subject, do not result from the alleged murder of Morgan. It is true this horrible event has induced me to think more, and more seriously, than I should otherwise have done, of the society; but I have long entertained my present opinion, *that a man who would eschew all evil, should not be a Free Mason.* Perhaps I cannot give a stronger evidence that this is not an opinion recently formed than to mention that my son, by my advice, has never joined the fraternity.

I cannot mention the deplorable event to which I have referred, without exculpating, so far as any thing I can say will do it, the Masonic fraternity from any participation in that outrage. For a long time I did not believe that Morgan had been put to death. But I find myself obliged to yield to the force of evidence. I yet entertain the most entire confidence that the fraternity did not participate in this crime. On the contrary, I do not doubt but that all the guilt of that transaction is confined to those infatuated men who assailed and slew him. The rest of the craft, I am entirely convinced, are as innocent of the blood of Morgan as I am. I fully believe that they hold the perpetrators in just abhorrence; they would rejoice if the guilty were discovered, and would aid in bringing the murderers to condign punishment.*

* We very much regret the mistake of Mr. Colden on this subject, for a mistake it certainly is, although easily accounted for. Mr. C. confesses frankly his dislike to the Institution, and his disbelief for some time of the murder of Morgan. Had Mr. C. perused the public documents, he could immediately have had no doubt. The same cause, it seems, has produced a similar effect—that is, a mistake on the part of Mr. C. touching the Institution being not implicated in the gross outrages committed. We will however no farther contradict Mr. C. nor anticipate the public opinion. We ask candid men to examine the public trials; the convictions under them; to consider the perjuries committed by Masons to screen the guilty; to reflect upon the numbers indicted, suspected, and called as evidence,—all Masons, and all aiming at the acquittal of the party tried,—and then say, if only a few were concerned,—or rather to say, if the Institution is not fairly impli-

I do not believe that those who committed this crime, had any intention to take the man's life when they first assailed him. Under the influence of an enthusiasm which the forms and mysteries of Masonry are so likely to excite in weak minds, they thought it would be meritorious to inflict some punishment for what they considered his delinquency. But they proceeded from step to step, until they found they had involved themselves in a responsibility that would be ruinous, if Morgan should be left to call them to account. A frantic interpretation of their Masonic obligations, and their fears, assisted, probably, by coporal stimulants, led them to stain their hands with the blood of their victim.

If these conjectures be well founded, however little they will extenuate the crime of the murderers, the proof of such facts, would exonerate the great body of the craft from any participation in the guilt. But an institution, the forms, or obligations, or mysteries of which, can be so perverted, or so misunderstood, even by the weakest minds, as to induce a belief, that it may be meritorious to murder an apostate brother, no good man, on due consideration and reflection, can think deserving of his countenance and support.

If it be asked, what are the advantages of Masonry? It seems to me the answer may be given in these very few words: It often, by its charity, relieves the distressed. But at what an enormous expence is this charity dispensed? When all the machinery of lodges, grand lodges, chapters, encampments, councils, visiters, &c. &c. is taken into consideration, it must be obvious, that the charitable contributions of Masons are but trifles in comparison with the sums devoted to these objects. It may be doubted, whether all that has ever been applied to the charitable funds of the institution, would equal a hundredth part, perhaps I might say a thousandth part, of what has been expended by Masons, for their temples and their decorations, for personal trappings, for jewelry, for funerals, for processions, for festivals and in the conviviality so inseparable from the meetings of the fraternity.

Let it be admitted, however, that the institution does relieve the poor and distressed to the greatest extent. Are the secrecy and the ceremonies of Masonry necessary for the exercise of any virtue? Is it necessary that any set of men to be charitable, should do their deeds by night, in hidden places? That they should by awful ceremonies, establish a relationship among themselves, which many of them believe imposes duties and obligations in reference to each other different from those by which they are bound to the rest of mankind? Many of the fraternity feel themselves obliged, in whatever situation they may be placed, to suffer an appeal from a brother mason to have an influence.—Offenders have persuaded themselves they could claim an exemption from punishment as Masons; and even at the bar of a court of justice, a criminal has thought he secured impunity by revealing to the judge, who was about to pronounce his sentence, their Masonic relationship.

If Masonry separates the members of the craft from their fellow citizens; if Masons are led to believe that their duty towards each other is different from what it is to the members of the community not connected with them; if a Mason is bound to shield another from the

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cated in the guilt of Morgan's abduction and murder;—for if the crimes for which they were convicted had not been approved by the Institution, how comes it that all those convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for their crimes, should not have been expelled from Lodges? that on the contrary, so far from being expelled, they have been exalted in the Lodges, nourished, cherished, and rewarded, and even with money, as brethren suffering in a righteous *masonic* cause, although gross violators of the laws of their country? The suggestions we make and submit them to the judgment of an impartial public, as well as to Mr. Colden himself.

general operation of the laws, or if he be subjected to any penalties beyond those denounced by the legislature; nay, if even a feeble minded man is made to believe that by becoming a Mason, be enlists in an isolated corps, the members of which may claim privileges through their brethren, and must perform duties which do not belong to other citizens, it cannot be a fit institution in our country, where no man in the discharge of his duties to the community, should act from fear, favor, or affection.

It is often alleged that Masonry engenders and cherishes the social affections, by bringing men together with kindly feelings towards each other. It is not to be doubted but that a well regulated social intercourse has a beneficial influence on the disposition and character of mankind. But again, it must be asked, why is the secrecy, the parade, and the obligations of Masonry necessary, if their objects be so virtuous? It is to be feared, however, that these meetings have not always a happy influence. Admitting that the utmost decorum and propriety are observed, while a lodge is open, yet the craft seldom separate without refreshment; and it often happens that more is taken than is necessary to repair the exhaustion of their labors, and too frequently, more than is consistent with temperance.

Attendance upon lodges sometimes leads to habits which are inimical to the prosperity and happiness of the members and their families. Every meeting of a lodge is attended by visitors, and as there are generally, even in the country several lodges within the compass of ten or twenty miles, opportunities for these visitations frequently occur. Often the habit of making them renders a man, who would otherwise have been content with his own fireside, impatient at home, and desirous to exchange for the excitement of a Masonic banquet, those enjoyments of his domestic circle with which he would have been perfectly content had it not been for the seductions of the craft.

Did I know of any other advantage than these two, charity and the cultivation of social dispositions, which any rational man at this day, imputes to Masonry, I would not fail to mention it.

But it is to be objected to Masonry, not only that no good comes of it, but that it is productive of positive evils. To some of these I have already adverted, and will notice others which have presented themselves very forcibly to my mind, and I may say, to my conscience.

If Masonry is arrogant and impious in her pretensions, and delusive in her promises, surely she deserves to be discountenanced. If she claim to be co-eval with the world, and to be of Divine origin, when in truth she is but as of yesterday, and springs from the dust of the earth, what obligation can there be that should induce any man to hesitate to speak of her according to her demerits?

That operative or practical Masonry was one of the earliest arts practiced by mankind, is very probable. We may suppose that Masons, as well as other trades, very soon formed themselves into separate societies, and adopted regulations, the better to establish and secure their interests. The employment of Masons naturally brought them, as builders and architects, more than the members of any other trade, in contact with the wealthier and higher orders of society. Men, as distinguished for their science as for their rank, were placed at the head of congregations of operative Masons. It then became an honor to be an associate of these bodies. Members were admitted who were not operatives. These soon changed the nature of the institution by which they had been adopted, or as their term is,

accepted; and, instead of the objects of the assemblies of Masons being operative Masonry, they were converted to lodges of speculative Masons, in which the tools and instruments of the former humble trade were retained to be transmuted into symbols of all the virtues and duties of mankind.

No man, at this day, who has taken the least pains to examine the subject, can doubt that this is the origin of Free Masonry, or that the change from operative to speculative Masonry took place in very modern times. The Masonic Society has no more pretence to a Divine origin, than the societies of stationers, butchers, bakers, carpenters, or any other trade. These, for ages, have had, like operative Masons, their assemblies, in which their worshipful masters and wardens have presided; but they have been left in obscurity because their occupations did not bring them in familiar intercourse with men of wealth and power.

The first three degrees of Masonry, when traced back to the actual labors of the craft, may claim some sort of antiquity; but as to all the numerous grades above these, (I think to the number of fifty,) they are of very modern invention, and are but the contrivances of ambitious or artful men to gratify their own vanity, or to obtain money from the vanity and folly of others. They have raked from the bigotry and chivalry of the dark ages of the old world, the names of certain orders, which never had any connexion with ancient Masonry. These modern institutions are no more branches of the Masonic system, than they are of the orders, whose titles they assume.

The pretence that Masons are possessed of any peculiar knowledge, is as fallacious as their claim to a supernatural and anti-deluvian origin. But if they possess all that they pretend to have, of what advantage is it to themselves or to mankind? Suppose some cabalistic words have been preserved and transmitted by Masons through ages, and that the fables they recite were true histories, how would it benefit themselves or their fellow men? The world must again be covered with that darkness which excluded all moral and scientific light, before such knowledge can be of any use even to the possessors.

But it is pretended that lodges are schools of the moral and physical sciences, and instruction in these is promised to those who join the fraternity. I have never heard of any attempt to impart any other moral instruction than that which could be conveyed by precepts like these: That Masons must live within the compass; walk upright as the plumb; must deal on the square, and other such mystical advice. As to the sciences, the whole scope of instruction goes no further than frequently to remind the brethren that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and rules the day, and that the moon rules the night.

That we may be in no danger of violating the secrets of Masonry, of having our judgments biased by the antiquity it claims, or by respect for the many great and good men whose names are on the list of its votaries, let us for a moment put it out of view, and suppose that it were now proposed to establish a society, which, with awful solemnities, and dreadful denunciations, should impose secrecy on its members; that they should separate themselves from the rest of mankind, and establish an intelligence by which they could, under any circumstances, make themselves known to each other; that the duties of the members, in regard to themselves, should be

incompatible with the general order of society; that when a member of the association should make himself known to another, he might look to that other for special favor, whether it was to be dispensed at the polls of an election, from the jury-box, or from the bench. Suppose that the members of this association were bound to screen each other, as far as in their power, from all evil, by concealment; or by more active exertions, to relieve them from all dangers and difficulties, however they might arise from demerit. Let us suppose that all these obligations were to be imposed with awful religious ceremonies, and with sanguinary and horrible penalties, of which each member should consider himself pledged to be the executor. We may suppose this institution to have many grades, and that, at every advance, there are new ceremonies, new oaths, and new penalties, the higher differing from the lowest, only in grossness of absurdity, and impiety of imprecations. That the members of this new institution, decorated themselves with the trappings of royalty, and bestowed on each other sacerdotal, aristocratic, and even royal titles. If such a society were now to be proposed, who would hesitate to say that it would be profane, and inconsistent with our religious, moral, social, and political institutions. One of the most serious objections which might be urged to such an institution, would be its frequent administration of oaths. There would be danger that even these obligations, however solemnly imposed, would become so familiar as to be little regarded; and the simple adjurations of a court of justice, administered with the least possible ceremony, would appear, when compared with the awful ceremonies of the society, to deserve but slight consideration. If the supposed oath imposed obligations which could not be fulfilled without a violation of the duties of a citizen, and indeed without crime, every honest man would shrink from the literal interpretation of it, and would find a refuge in construing it so as to reconcile it to his conscience; rejecting such parts as he did not find acceptable. Oaths, with which there must be so much tampering, could not but have a pernicious effect on society. But these effects would be still more deplorable, were the oaths to be observed according to their letter.

Masonry disclaims all interference in political matters. If, in this country, she has taken any part in the contentions of politicians, it has only been of late. While I was connected with the society, I had every reason to believe that she observed the forbearance she avows. But it must be obvious, that the whole machinery of the institution is peculiarly adapted to political intrigue; and though, in our country, its influence may not have been perceived by any party, yet we see that in a sister republic, so far from its being considered the duty of the fraternity to keep apart from politics, the parties whose dissentions distract the commonwealth, are arranged under different Masonic denominations. Scotch Masons, and York Masons, in that country, no less designate Masons of different sects, than they do partizans of different politics. If lodges may be converted into secret political clubs, they ought to be feared in a free country.

It has often occurred to me as a little extraordinary, that in this republican country of ours, where we claim to be such pure Democrats, there should be manifested in those who become Masons, such a passion for finery, pageantry, dignities, and titles. One who affects to despise the blue or red ribband, the star and garter of an English lord, or the coronet of a foreign prince, clothes himself with

the utmost complacency, in all the colors of the rainbow, and decorates himself with as many jewels and medals, as are worn by an Indian chief. He expects from the fellows of his community, to be addressed by the titles of Worshipful, Most Worshipful, Excellent, Most Excellent, Illustrious, and Most Illustrious, with as much certainty as the greatest despot in the world requires from his slaves a recognition of the rank he assumes. We see from the Masonic notices daily published in our papers, that Knight, Prince, and even King, are familiar titles, by which those to whom they belong are always addressed by their brethren in their assemblies. "To his Most Illustrious Highness, Prince of the Royal Secret of the thirty-third degree," is a title which emblazons the name of many a good republican in this community. Foreigners must think we are not less fond of the show, and trappings, and titles of aristocracy and royalty, than any other people, when they see that we are so eager to adopt them, in the only way tolerated by our political constitutions.

It is true there is something of equality in this, inasmuch as every man, of every grade, and every complexion, may be invested with all the finery, and the magnificent titles of the order. All others, however, are rivalled by the splendor of the Black Lodges of this city, headed by their Respectable and Worshipful Masters.

I have known many persons whose brains have been turned by their elevation from humble occupations to royal titles and imaginary thrones. Indeed, I have never known a very great Mason, who was not a very great fool. I beg to be understood. I do not mean by very great Masons, those who have stood highest in the estimation of the craft, and who have attained the highest Masonic honors. I do not forget that the names of Washington, Clinton, Warren, La Fayette, Franklin, Robert R. Livingston, Jackson, and Marshall, are justly the boast of the fraternity; nor is it possible that I should ever forget that I have seen many venerated Clergymen, sanctifying by their presence and their prayers, the labors, as well as the refreshments of a lodge. But I mean by great Masons, those who are proud of their pompous titles; who are fond of decorations; who persuade themselves that the affairs of the world turn upon Masonry; that without it, society could hardly exist, or if it did, would be deprived of its fairest ornament, and most beneficial arrangement.

It may be asked, how it happens that I should have been so long a Mason and not until this time expressed my disapprobation of the institution. It is true, it is nearly forty years since I became a member of the Masonic fraternity, but I began to question its utility long ago. It must be fifteen or twenty years since I belonged to any lodge, and some eight or ten years that I have not been within the walls of a lodge room. During this time, I have not hesitated to express opinions in accordance with what I have now written.

When I was hardly twenty-one years of age, I was initiated in a lodge in New-York, which was distinguished for the respectability of its members. All of these I knew must have submitted to whatever would be required of me. My confidence, that they would not have done any thing wrong, induced me to pass through the required forms with very little—too little consideration. A like deference for the example of others, led me from step to step, with the same inconsiderateness. It was not till the buoyancy of youth had passed, that I began to see the vanity and folly, and, as I thought, the

evil tendency of Masonry. Morgan's fate has, I acknowledge, strengthened the unfavorable impressions I entertained previously to his murder. Since that event, I have thought the institution not only idle and useless, but this horrible catastrophe has evinced that its mysteries may engender infatuation that will stop at no crime. Since that event, I have believed it would be a relinquishment of a duty I owed to society, if I suffered my respect for those venerated men who have left the world to believe that Masonry was approved by them, prevent me from expressing the convictions of my own mind of its merits. The example of the many who have stood as high in the ranks of Masonry as in the estimation of the world, would have induced me to have buried my own thoughts in silence. I should have been awed by their opinions could I be sure that these patrons, of whom Masonry so justly boasts, deliberately examined the merits of the institution; but when I reflect how many years of my life were passed before I gave the subject due consideration, I cannot but suppose that they, like myself, for a long time, may have been content to rest on the example of their predecessors, and that they have left their successors free to express their opinions. If these are unfavorable to Masonry, no one can say that they are in opposition to what would have been the deliberate judgment of the persons whose great examples are considered of such authority.

I am happy that the letter I have had the honor to receive from you, affords me an opportunity to express, in such a manner as I presume will give them publicity, my sentiments on this subject. I have reason to believe they are in accordance with those of many good and respectable men who are Masons; and who, I hope, will not by their silence, suffer their example in becoming Masons to have an undue influence. I come forward the more readily at this moment, when I think no party or unworthy motive can be imputed to me; when the excitement occasioned by the murder of Morgan, has subsided into a just abhorrence of the guilty; and when the question is not whether every Mason is not a bad man, but whether Masonry is not a bad institution. I believe that it does no good that might not be accomplished by far better means. Its secresy and extensive combinations are dangerous. Its titles and trappings are vain, foolish, and inconsistent with our republican institutions. Its pretensions are absurd, fallacious and impious; and its ceremonies and mysteries are profane, and lead many to believe that they impose obligations paramount to the laws. However limited the influence of my opinions might be, I should be sorry to end my life, leaving it to be believed that I had lived and died the advocate of an institution of which I entertained such views.

Having, agreeably to your request, freely expressed myself on the subject to which your letter refers, I have only to add, Gentlemen, assurances of the respect with which I have the honor to be,

Your Obedient Humble Servant,

CADWALLADER D. COLDEN.

Col. Rich'd Varick,
Samuel St. John, Esq.
Thomas Fessenden, Esq.
} Committee, &c.

New-York, May 4, 1829.

EASTBURN, PRINTER, 60 CONGRESS STREET, BOSTON.